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AUTHOR Reel, Judee
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ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for good business English Second Language courses is stymied by a lack of research and good teaching tools concerning speech acts used in business meetings. This study analyzed speech acts used in two business meetings and evaluated four business English textbooks to determine the type of English used in real business settings and its reflection in current instructional materials. An analysis of the language used in two editorial meetings of a university publishing department found that business English in real-life situations was informal, subtle, direct, idiomatic, and full of overlap and incomplete sentences. Unexpected forms, which appear to mean one thing but actually mean another, were used, and speech acts were expressed using so many variants that no particular form could be identified as the canonical form. None of these characteristics was adequately covered in the four textbooks reviewed. (Contains 11 references.) (MDM)

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SPEECH ACTS USED IN BUSINESS MEETINGS (AND ELSEWHERE)

Judee Reel

The increasing demand for good business ESL courses is stymied by a lack of research and good teaching tools concerning speech acts used in business meetings. To make suggestions both for research and for classroom activities, I analyzed speech acts used in two business meetings that I sat in on, and evaluated four textbooks in light of what I learned through my analysis.

I found the language used in real business meetings to be informal, subtle, direct, idiomatic, and full of overlap and incomplete sentences (especially, self-interrruption). There was a "wind-down" at the end of the meetings, which might correlate with the "closing" of a conversation. There were many forms for a given speech act, and there were different registers for each speech act. Unexpected forms, which appear to mean one thing, but actually mean another, were used, and speech acts were expressed using so many variants that no particular form could be identified as the canonical form. None of these characteristics is adequately taught in the textbooks I examined.

As for future research, we need a complete list of speech acts, and to know the frequency of occurrence of each speech act. We need to decide which activities are speech acts, which

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are discourse functions, and if there are activities which should be placed in another category or categories. Also, it may be that "offering an opinion" and "clarifying" are the two most complex speech acts; they should be given priority in future studies. First, however, we need to understand the structure of the business meeting; for this, a thorough discourse analysis is needed.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing demand for good business ESL courses is stymied by a deficiency of both research and good teaching tools concerning the language used in business meetings. The scholarly research concerning business English in general is beginning to increase (e.g., Tsuda, 1984); conferences are being held on the subject, such as the English for Professional Communications Conference held at City Polytechnic of Hong Kong in 1992, and the Eastern Michigan University conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions; and dissertations are being written. Yet, the conclusions of research is that the textbooks are still slow to teach real language (Williams, 1988; Rees-Miller, 1993).

While there is significant ongoing scholarly discussion of speech act theory (Leech, 1983; Flowerdew, 1990, to name only two of many), I have been able to find only one example of original research on speech acts in

meetings (Williams, 1988), and one example of analysis of speech acts in advertisements (Adegbija, 1982).

In order to make suggestions for research, for teaching, and (as it turns out) for textbook writing, my tape recorder and I sat in on two business meetings of a publications arm of a large university. Then, I evaluated four ESL textbooks which deal specifically with business meetings and compared them with the information I had gained from analyzing the meetings transcripts. In this paper, I focus on the research results, and only occasionally refer to the implications for teaching and textbook writing.

METHODOLOGY

In both of the meetings, I sat at the table with the participants, but avoided any participation in the meetings. Because I was well-known by the participants, I avoided eye contact and set up a psychological distance in order to remain merely an observer. I tape recorded and also took notes of the meetings.

Analysis of Meeting A

Setting. Meeting A was a regular meeting of the acquisitions editorial committee of a publishing arm of a large, Midwest university. The purpose of the meeting was to choose or reject for publication certain manuscripts. The attendees were the Director (a man), Associate Director (a woman), the Director of Marketing (a woman) and the Director of Publications (a man).

All are native speakers of American English. The meeting lasted about two hours and a half.

Sociolinguistic issues. The attendees of the meeting were the highest level of each area represented. The managerial style of the Director was participatory and consensus-oriented, owing, perhaps, to the purpose of the meeting and to the high level positions of the attendees.

Atmosphere. The meeting was held partly after regular office hours (4:00--6:30) and met in a local hamburger chain. Everyone bought a light snack to eat during the meeting. Things were very relaxed. There was an air of mutual respect.

Analysis of Meeting B

Setting. Meeting B was at the same publishing arm of the large, Midwest university as Meeting A. It was a regular meeting of the Department Heads for the purpose of keeping everyone abreast of what the other departments were doing. (As it turned out, there was no new business to report and the stated purpose of the meeting--to keep everyone abreast of what the other departments were doing--was not carried out. However, the meeting was used as an opportunity to raise a public health issue related to the building in which everyone worked, and to seek a solution to the problem.) Two of the Department Heads were unable to attend, and one came in only at the very end. The Director was there for part of the meeting, but went in and out because of long-distance conference calls he

was participating in. All attendees are native speakers of American English. The meeting lasted about an hour.

Sociolinguistic issues. The meeting consisted of one man (the Director), and three (finally, four) women. The Associate Director, the woman who chaired the meeting, has worked in the organization for many years and is higher in the organization than the other attendees except the Director, but she does not have a doctorate. The Director and at least two of the women hold doctorates. The youngest woman is early middle aged, the other members of the meeting are well into middle age. Therefore, the status issue was one of more or less equality. By virtue of his position, the Director had the most power in the situation; and his managerial style was, basically, to listen until everyone had said what she wanted and, then, to summarize and call for action. The Associate Director, by virtue of her positions, had more power than the participants. The power issue is especially relevant in this situation because the main business of the meeting was a complaint made by the youngest woman. Furthermore, the chair of the meeting resisted the suggested resolutions to the problem and the attendees had to try to overcome her objection. Complaints, and disagreements with the boss, call for highly sensitive and, often, subtle use of language and attention to how power issues are expressed in language.

Atmosphere. This meeting was a small, informal meeting, held at the working table in the Director's office, with the door open. It was a regular meeting. There was a high level of respect, friendliness, and openness. There was friendly chitchat before and after the meeting.

The Textbooks

Of the many books on business English available at the 1992 TESOL conference (surely a quite large, if not complete, selection), I was only able to find four which deal specifically with business meetings.[1] All of the books come out of England and contain and teach British English (one of them includes some American English terms). I was unable to purchase the Longman book, Meetings and Discussions, but was able to find their Ready for Business, by Andrew Vaughan and Neil Heyen (1990), and so I examined it and Business Objectives, Lower Intermediate Business English, by Vicki Hollett (1991), International Business English, A Course in Communication Skills, by Leo Jones and Richard Alexander (1989 and 1991), and Meetings, by Malcolm Goodale (1987).[2]

DISCUSSION

Background

Business English, like all Englishes for Specific Purposes (ESP), requires at least a moderate level of competence in the language for the functions and purposes of a meeting to happen. On top of that, a business meeting is a highly sophisticated level of communication, and one that may require subtle uses of language. A business meeting consists of many speech acts, each of which may be expressed in several forms, and each form of which can be expressed in a different register.

Also, a business meeting can take many forms and varieties. It can be small, short, informal, friendly, familiar, and balanced in terms of status and

power. It can be large, long, formal, unfriendly, unfamiliar and unbalanced in terms of status and power. (Or a mixture of these.) The roles of the participants can vary from being the leader to being the follower (and intermediate positions of power); can include being on the defensive, or the offensive, or neither. Strategies may be preplanned or not. All of these aspects affect the use of language. Other variables include whether or not the size of the room is appropriate for the number of participants, if the room is too hot or cold, the time at which, or the day on which, the meeting takes place, whether or not an attendee has jet lag, and how many native languages are represented by the participants. All of these characteristics affect the use of language.

We already have a handle on some of these variables (formality versus informality, status versus no status, expert versus non-expert), thanks to research, and we must continue to collect and analyze more data, in order to help textbook writers supply teachers and students with adequate information about how to use English in a business context. Recognizing the variables gives us ideas about what to research next.

Results

In analyzing the language used in the meetings, I was struck by six qualities of the language.

1. The extreme informality of the language. While there <u>are</u> formal business meetings, and, therefore, a need for formal language, the vast majority of meetings are informal. For example, in the meetings I recorded,

no one ever said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we shall now adjourn the meeting." They said, "That's it," or, "OK...We're finished." The most common form of disagreeing was not "With all due respect, I must disagree," but "Yeah, but..." And, to agree, no one said, "I'm for the motion, because...," but, "That makes sense." Instead of clarifying a speaker's point by saying, "I didn't quite follow what you said about...," an attendee said, "Wait a minute. The first one..."

2. The subtlety of the language. For example, "I just want us to understand what we're saying..." is not a clarification of language, but draws the attention to the implications of decisions being made. (Although it can, of course, be a literal clarification of language, such as in the John Lennon song, "What we are saying/Is give peace a chance.") Or, in "I'm really not content to just [take X (ineffective) action]...I'm really not," the two "reallys" serve both to strengthen and soften the refusal to accept the offered solution. (The speaker was resisting her boss's suggestion.) The same speaker later used the words "really" and "you know" to serve the same purpose ("I really would like to see [X action], you know, and...) The "really" and "you know" soften the demand, while allowing the speaker to increase the details of the demand. (The speaker has just gone over the Chair's head to the Director.) In another example, a speaker made an argument in support of an earlier statement (made by another speaker) by saying, "I guess my question about [this issue] is..." The speaker softened her statement with "I guess" and by asserting that she was really asking a

question. She was neither guessing, nor asking a question. However, she was very carefully trying to overrule her boss, who had just spoken.

3. The directness of the language. One of the most often listed speech act forms in the textbooks is, "In my opinion." In the meetings I taped, no one ever used that phrase--or any phrase--as a preface to offering an opinion. They just stated what they thought, e.g., "This was handled very poorly," or, "I like it, because...," or "I think sending an e-mail message..." (In point of fact, in real usage, the phrase, "in my opinion," serves to <u>disagree</u> with something that has been said, and requires certain stress and tone patterns.)

4. The very large number of idioms used. For example, "It's worth a try," and "Are we gonna be wrapping up soon?" The speech in the meetings was so full of idioms that I am almost willing to suggest that it is more important to teach our students idioms than grammar, especially at the advanced levels. That idioms played such a large role in the communication of these meetings raises the issue of implications for our understanding of what language is. What implications does this have for world Englishes and international businesses, given that idioms tend to be place-specific?

5. The large number of incomplete sentences (especially, self-interruption). I do not know the ratio of incomplete sentences to complete sentences, but I suspect it was easily in the majority.

6. The overlap which is always noted under real-life circumstances: more than one person was often speaking at a time.

In addition to these six characteristics, I found that both meetings contained what I call the "wind down" at the end of the meetings, and which might correlate with the "closing" of a conversation. This is a transition from group to individual action and, often, from business to social intercourse, which has pragmatic implications.

I also observed quite a few examples of what I call unexpected forms. These are forms that look (sound) like they mean something different from what they do mean. For example, I recorded one speaker offering an opinion by saying, "My question is not X, but Y..." While one would expect this phraseology to be an example of someone asking a question, in the context, the person used this language to offer her opinion. Another example, "I vote for turning it down," sounds like formal decision-making language. Yet, in the context, it was not. The speaker was expressing an opinion which was immediately mitigated by the Chair of the meeting. Another unexpected form was an example of clarifying/summarizing by saying, "The question is..." This was, actually, a variation of "It is a question of.." and, in the context, signified conditions under which something might be able to occur. It was not used to ask a question.

Unexpected forms begin to blur the boundaries of what may be called a speech act. To increase the confusion, there were also samples of speech acts expressed with no particular form at all, that is, with so many variants that no particular form could be identified as the canonical form, and further, that the variant was unpredictable; such as, a speaker expressing agreement by finishing another speaker's sentence for her (not to be

confused with overlap, where each speaker uses his or her own sentence), or another speaker confirming/clarifying by repeating the item in question, with a stress on the item that is being confirmed/clarified, "So, X topic would come after.," or another speaker clarifying what was said by referring to actions he would have to take (namely, write a letter), depending on what had been meant: "Well, now I have to write a letter."

It may be that we will decide that 'agreeing' and 'clarifying,' and other verbal activities in business meetings, are not speech acts. Certainly, Flowerdew (p. 89-90) argues that they are too "diffuse" to be "susceptible to analysis in terms of speech acts" (pp. 89--90). It may be that we will have to rewrite speech act theory where it does not reflect real langugage, or we may decide that some of these verbal activities belong in a category other than speech acts.

None of these issues is adequately addressed by the textbooks I looked at. For example, the textbooks tended to give formal options; and only one of the textbooks I looked at gave students a choice of two options, one more formal, one less.

I was shocked to find one of the textbooks, Ready for Business, teaching the students to be indirect, actually stating that direct questions, for example, is an aggressive form. The book claims to have been successfully used to teach English in Japan, and perhaps this is where the concern for indirect speaking comes from. However, to teach students to be indirect is sending them in the wrong direction. Americans might actually find indirectness confusing. Also, to advise the student that a direct

question is an aggressive form will lead the student to misunderstand much of what he or she is being asked.

Similarly, the books failed to discuss idioms, to give examples and interpretation of subtle language (especially important in negotiations), to even mention overlap or incomplete sentences, a "wind-down," or to prepare the students for unexpected forms.

A brief comparison of examples from the textbooks with examples from the meetings will have to suffice as evidence that textbook writers need to be more informed by research. (See Table of Comparisons.) For a more thorough comparison of real speech with textbook examples, see Williams, 1988.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

We need a complete list of speech acts, and the frequency of occurrence. Also, it may be that the two most difficult speech acts are "offering an opinion," and "clarifying." Based on the admittedly limited research I have done for this paper, I would recommend that these two speech acts might appropriately be given a high priority among research projects.

However, the first research area should be in the structure of the business meeting--a thorough discourse analysis. We need to know what can happen, and in what order, before we can know in what form these things can happen. Knowing the speech acts and forms alone is inadequate because they are only building blocks; we need blueprints, or at least the architect's finished sketch. When a given speech act is made by

one person, what are the possible speech acts that may serve as responses to the first speech act? I suspect that taking a speech act out of its context will not give us the full information we need about it. To do so is similar to looking at words outside of the context of their sentence, or sentences outside of the context of a paragraph. One thing we know, for example, is that the activities in a business meeting can be cyclic.

We need to decide which activities or functions are speech acts and which are discourse functions (is "introduce a topic" a speech act or a discourse function?), and how to categorize any activities which do not fit into either of these categories (what are "clarifying" and "agreeing"?) Is the business meeting a discourse unit, or is it made of many discourse units?

Because of what I am calling 'unexpected forms,' and because of the phenomena of using so many variants to express a speech act that no particular form can be canonized, we need to categorize speech act functions--not verbs--and then let whatever verb, word or phrase do the job.

We do not know what constitutes business English, or, more specifically, the English used in business meetings--how does it differ from other English discourse? We must look, first, to the business world for the raw data and, next, to discourse analysis and pragmatics to answer this question. We must ask what kinds of activities take place in meetings, how these activities are expressed verbally, what is the structure of the verbal activities (discourse functions, speech acts), and what forms are used in the construction of the speech acts, and under what conditions.

Table of Comparisons

TEXTBOOK EXAMPLES	RECORDED SPEECH
Offer Opinion	**Offer Opinion**
In my opinion...	I like it because...
I think/believe/feel that...	It just occurred to me that...
In my view...	Sure, we could do that...
I agree entirely with Mrs...	One thing we might consider...
If I could just make a point...	My question is not X, but Y...
	I vote for turning it down...
Disagree	**Disagree**
I'm against the motion...	But, then...
I don't quite agree with...	Yeah, but...
With all due respect,	I'm not arguing for X,
I must disagree...	I'm saying...
Check/Correct (Mis)understanding	**Clarify**
Does that mean...?	Wait a minute. The first one is...
..., is that right?	Is there a reason...?
Perhaps I should make that clearer...	The question is...
I'm afraid there seems to have been	If we turn this one down,
a slight misunderstanding.	we're saying...

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THE AUTHOR

Judee Reel holds an M.A. in TESOL from Indiana University. She taught business English at Harvard University's Summer ESL Program in 1992, and is currently teaching business English at the International Trade Institute in Hsinchu, Taiwan.

NOTES

1. A fifth, Business World, A Collection of Readings on Contemporary Issues, by Roger Speegle and William B. Giesecke, published by Oxford University Press, requires the students to participate in a "scenario for a personnel meeting," but gives no information as to how to do so.

2. As of this writing, I am adding to my textbook collection in anticipation of continuing this research, but I have not yet examined any more books.

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